

London's Dispossessed: Questioning the Neo-Victorian Politics of Neoliberal Austerity in

Richard Warlow's *Ripper Street*

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Abstract: The moral justification for the rollback of benefits and services under the austerity programme unleashed by George Osborne since 2010, when he was first appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer by British Prime Minister David Cameron, is predicated on a neoliberal ideology that views unemployment and poverty as stemming from personal failings rather than the ways in which the free market has shaped British society since the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. By using Charles Murray's neo-Victorian argument that the welfare state has created a work-shy, antisocial 'underclass', neoliberal politicians and journalists have mythologised the Victorian era as one of discipline and stability, providing a model for the sort of society we should aspire once more to be. This article argues Richard Warlow's television series, *Ripper Street* (2012–), in showing the socio-economic causes of crime in late-Victorian London and the need for collective action and state intervention to alleviate them, challenges the construction of the era used to justify neoliberal austerity. It does so through what Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn characterise as one of the defining features of neo-Victorian fiction; its ability to demonstrate the 'quasi-fictiveness of the Victorians to our own period', implicitly drawing parallels between the progressive zeal of nineteenth-century social reformers and the anti-austerity movement today.

Keywords: *Neo-Victorianism, austerity, neoliberalism, underclass, welfare, television studies*

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Introduction

Richard Warlow's BBC television show, *Ripper Street* (2012–), combines period drama and police procedural to offer a neo-Victorian exploration of contemporary discourses about crime, poverty, and punishment through its depiction of late-nineteenth-century London. Beginning in 1889, the show focuses on the investigations of Detective Inspector Edmund Reid (Matthew Macfadyen) of Whitechapel's H Division, whose commitment to the principle of equality before the law and awareness of the systemic causes of crime interpellates a socially liberal audience critical of the class system and institutions of the period. In doing so, *Ripper Street* offers a neo-Victorian exploration of the conditions of those dispossessed by an economic system that exploits and discards them. This contrasts with the neo-Victorian rhetoric of neoliberal journalists and politicians determined to place the blame for poverty and crime on individuals rather than the sweeping economic and political reforms that took place from 1979 onwards.

American social policy expert Charles Murray set the terms of debate about the link between crime and poverty in neoliberal Britain when he wrote two highly influential articles for *The Sunday Times* in the 1980s and 1990s that claimed the welfare state had produced a work-shy, antisocial, and criminal underclass. This has led to calls for a return to Victorian values and harsh penalties for those deemed to be the undeserving poor, who have become

the victims of a neo-Victorian politics that seeks moral justification for high unemployment, under-employment, and ever-widening inequality. In *Inventing the Victorians*, Matthew Sweet attempts to ‘conjure up the excitement, the permissiveness, the sense of pleasurable velocity that was central to the Victorian experience; to demolish the notion that the nineteenth century was an era best characterized by reticence, stability, sobriety and conservatism’ (xxii). Sweet concludes by asking ‘What is to be done? Is there any way to liberate the Victorians from this position? To extricate them from the approval of reactionaries and the hindsight moralism of the progressives?’ (229). As Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn note, such searching reappraisals of Victorian life can be found in neo-Victorian fiction, which underlines ‘the historical relativity and quasi-fictiveness of the Victorians to our own period, even as it simultaneously exploits the possibilities that chronological distance provides’ (*Neo-Victorianism* 22). *Ripper Street*’s neo-Victorianism manifests by interrogating how the Victorian era has been mythologized within neoliberalism through period crime drama that echoes contemporary social problems.

Thus, *Ripper Street*’s Reid can be read not only as a proto-Modern man looking to reform society and address the systemic causes of crime, but also as a representative of the progressive Victorian conveniently forgotten by those who support the neoliberal project. Whereas Julian Fellowes’s rival contemporary British period drama for ITV, *Downton Abbey* (2010-5), romanticises the era of high Toryism in the early twentieth century for its sense of order and tradition, *Ripper Street* explores the darker aspects of life prior to the establishment of the welfare state, exposing the ways in which poverty and desperation created the conditions for crime. By showing how punitive policies both fostered and inflicted forms of violence in the capital, *Ripper Street* counters the nostalgic use of Victorian values as justification for the austerity programme overseen by Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne since David Cameron first formed a government in 2010. Focusing on the first

season, in which the politics of the show are established, I will argue that *Ripper Street* challenges neoliberal neo-Victorian politics by identifying abuses of wealth and power, as well as the systemic causes of crime and poverty, that require state intervention and collective action to address.

The Neo-Victorian Politics of Neoliberalism

British neoliberalism began its path to ascendancy in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party was elected with a mandate to weaken union power and overhaul the economy from manufacturing and industry to the service sector. As David Harvey notes, neoliberalism is 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (*Neoliberalism* 2). However, the results of neoliberal policies over the past thirty-six years have been high unemployment, stagnating or lower pay, and worsened conditions for many of those in work, while entrenching an ever-growing gulf of inequality between those who benefit from these structural changes and the rest of the population. Given this state of affairs, neoliberals have sought to redirect the anger of workers at a number of targets that include immigrants, the unemployed, criminals, and socialists, claiming that they are responsible for higher taxation and driving down wages. Writing in the early years of Tony Blair's New Labour government, which continued many of these practices, Chris Jones and Tony Novak note how:

Holding the poor responsible for their own fate undermines the anger that poverty and inequality provoke while removing blame from the system that is responsible. Instead, the poor are seen as an expensive 'burden' on society, for whom the 'average

taxpayer' supposedly has little sympathy, especially when depicted as welfare 'scroungers', homeless, criminals and drug addicts. (*Poverty* 5)

In order to win popular support for policies that enrich the wealthy and punish the poor, British neoliberals needed to find an effective rhetoric for establishing scapegoating stereotypes. To do so, they would turn to the United States and the work of Charles Murray, famous for his ideas about the underclass (a large section of the poor defined by deviant attitudes about parenting, work, and crime), which in turn drew upon Victorian discourses about the 'residuum'.

In his articles for *The Sunday Times*, 'The Emerging British Underclass' (1989) and 'Underclass: The Crisis Deepens' (1994), Murray argues that deprived communities around Britain exemplify the moral corruption of an 'undeserving poor', making them into what he calls 'plague area[s]' ('Emerging' 25). Murray's solution advocates that the welfare state be rolled back in order to prevent the growth of a 'New Rabble'. Writing in the first two decades of British neoliberalism, Murray is dismissive of structural interpretations of poverty, seeing them as excuses for what he perceives to be the result of individual moral failings. Murray argues that the deviant attitudes of the underclass, typified as a disease, must be contained by a 'New Victorianism' among the upper middle class, which will be characterised by:

a revival of religion and of the intellectual respectability of concepts such as fidelity, courage, loyalty, self-restraint, moderation, and other admirable human qualities that until lately have barely dared speak their names. These changes will have sweeping effects on the national received wisdom, and on various behaviours ('Crisis' 113).

Having developed his underclass theory in the U.S., Murray exemplifies Heilman and Llewellyn's concern about a 'global neo-Victorianism [that] risks imposing collective memory over cultural specificity as part of a memorial imperialism' (37). Murray's neo-Victorian politics uses the rhetoric of the undeserving poor as an international ideological

justification for the inequalities of the neoliberal global economy. In contrast, *Ripper Street* challenges this by interrogating the ‘quasi-fictiveness of the Victorians to our own period’, focusing on the lives of those who suffered due to the socio-economic conditions of late-nineteenth-century London.

From the vantage point of 2016, Murray’s hoped for New Victorianism has not manifested, but the demonisation of large sections of the poor as an underclass has influenced the politics of austerity. As Alan Walker notes, ‘Murray’s underclass, like all previous attempts to individualise the causes of poverty, diverts our attention from blaming the mechanisms through which resources are distributed, including the role of the Government, to blaming, in William Ryan’s famous phrase, “the victims”’ (‘Blaming’ 73). Therefore, the practical consequence of neoliberal, neo-Victorian politics has been what Jones and Novak identify as a major shift away from the postwar welfare state to one in which ‘social policy has taken on a more authoritarian, less compassionate and more coercive tone’, forming the basis of what they describe as the ‘disciplinary state’ (*Poverty* 12).

The disciplinary state has been strengthened since 2010 by the policies of Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Iain Duncan Smith, who frames the reduction and withdrawal of state support as emancipatory: ‘I have long believed there is no kindness in a benefits system that traps people, leaving them in a twilight world where life is dependent on what is given to you, rather than what you are able to create’ (‘Speech’). Duncan Smith’s rhetoric draws on Murray’s argument that the welfare state has created an underclass, with the implication that freedom from state support will liberate the unemployed and disabled by motivating them to search ceaselessly for any form of employment. Furthermore, both owe an intellectual debt to Victorian interventions regarding the dangers of charity ‘de-moralizing’ the poor. As Simon Joyce notes, critics of charity claimed that ‘the cure of philanthropy is to be dreaded as far worse than the disease of poverty’ (*Capital* 158). This arose from the accusation that charities

offering ‘indiscriminate’ support meant that ‘the undeserving benefited as much as the deserving poor, who would quickly learn to modify their behavior’ (*Capital* 158). Joyce argues that the rhetoric behind fears of ‘de-moralization’ underscored how ‘the process was understood in terms of morality rather than economics. Since the operation of market forces was sacred to most policymakers and commentators, the impoverishment of the working class could only be the fault of wealthy philanthropists’ (*Capital* 157). Substitute the postwar welfare state for ‘wealthy philanthropists’ and you have the moral justification for neoliberal austerity, demonstrating the recursive nature of free market ideology. The identification of neoliberals with the free market is perhaps somewhat misleading. For, while they rail against the welfare state, they also use the considerable reach and power of government to create ever more markets, actively intervening in civil society and the economy. Duncan Smith’s ostensible benevolence is undermined when he reveals the role of welfare reform in worsening the conditions for workers by ‘modernis[ing] our work practices and creat[ing] a more flexible and responsive economy’ (‘Speech’), which means the acceptance of more irregular working hours for less money and with increasingly little security.

Thus, the importance of sanctioning claimants in order to discipline them into becoming ‘productive’ members of society has wider implications, since their labelling as the underclass is used as a threat to those who would challenge their employers and risk joining them. This can be seen in the increasingly coercive and degrading means-testing of benefits. In an article for *The Independent*, Terri Judd exposes the extent to which those who apply for state support are humiliated, describing former Lance-Corporal Mark Dryden’s experiences with Atos, the private contractor that until recently ran the government’s Work Capability Assessments. Dryden lost his right arm in a roadside explosion in Iraq and states that:

having to go cap in hand for benefits made him feel like ‘scum’, adding: ‘It was utterly degrading. He asked if I was right handed and when I said, “Do you see a right hand on my body?” he said, “I’ll take that as a no”’. (‘Betrayal’)

While humiliated by the system, Dryden still associates claiming benefits with being ‘scum’, showing how the neoliberal vilification of welfare recipients has been internalized even by many of those who must rely upon state support in order to survive. Thus, solidarity with others in similar circumstances is rendered unappealing and benefit claimants are made to cooperate in their own isolation within the disciplinary state.

We can see an expression of the neoliberal yearning to roll back the welfare state and reinforce strict class hierarchies in the first season of *Downton Abbey*, a series beginning in the years leading up to the First World War in which Robert Crawley (Hugh Bonneville), Earl of Grantham, is presented as the benign patriarch of a stately home. The tone is set in the opening episode of Season One as Grantham invites someone he served with in the Boer War to become his new valet. Mr John Bates (Brendan Coyle) suffers from a pronounced limp due to shrapnel lodged in one leg. The other servants are mortified that Bates be promoted ahead of one of their own and conspire to drive him from the post. Without any form of safety net and such open discrimination due to his disability, Bates fears destitution and cuts a solitary figure crying in his room the night before he is due to leave service after being summarily dismissed. When Grantham provides him with a last-minute reprieve, the valet is overwhelmed with gratitude at the same time as his infantilisation is intensified. While many of the working-class characters are subject to petty disloyalties, Grantham’s leadership is initially presented as measured, honourable, and even altruistic. This is exemplified in ‘Episode Two’, when Mr Carson (Jim Carter), the butler at Downton, is blackmailed by someone he once worked with and Grantham intercedes to protect him. The blackmailer warns Grantham that ‘the day is coming when your lot will have to toe the line like the rest of

us’, to which the Earl retorts ‘Perhaps. But happily for Carson, that day has not come yet.’

This peculiar exchange associates a rather debased form of socialist rhetoric with vindictive criminality, feeding fears of a rising underclass to be unleashed when the welfare state breaks down the order imposed by the class structure and free market.

When Grantham’s heir, Matthew Crawley (Dan Stevens), a lawyer who is uneasy with the pomp of the aristocracy, questions why he needs a servant to dress him, the Earl asks that he think of the livelihoods of the large serving staff at Downton: ‘We all have different parts to play, Matthew. And we must all be allowed to play them’. Thus, the power of the aristocracy is linked to the rural economy and any challenge to it is framed as an attack on the working-class people employed by them. Given their contemporaneous positioning in the respective scheduling for the BBC and ITV, David Stephenson notes in the *Express* that the producers of *Ripper Street* were ‘plotting to take over’ (‘Battle’) from *Downton Abbey* as the number one British period drama. While this is primarily couched in terms of ratings, which *Downton* easily won, the battle between the two shows is also one of ideology, with the hegemonic neoliberal nostalgia for a past free of the welfare state opposed by *Ripper Street*’s focus on the brutality of such socio-economic circumstances. Thus, *Ripper Street* offers a very different take on the middle class’s role in the fate of those who have been, or will be, made dispossessed by the free market.

Another London: Social Exploration Writing and the Promise of Progress

In 1888, the murder of five female sex workers in London’s Whitechapel by the elusive figure dubbed Jack the Ripper transformed the debate about the poorer districts of East London, which had been thought of as populated by a residuum. The Ripper murders were reported in the crusading ‘New Journalism’ pioneered by William Thomas Stead’s *Pall Mall Gazette*, which Darren Oldridge characterises by its ‘emphasis on crime and “sensation”, and

the willingness of newspapers to campaign on themes deemed important to their readers and the wider public' ('Casting' 47). This politicised press coverage highlighted widespread social deprivation in the East End, but also began rumours of an insane aristocrat or medical professional preying on the vulnerable. Joyce notes how such speculation led to a retroactive reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll* as 'the archetypal privileged offender', which 'helped to solidify a counter-discourse on the Left, which held West End capitalists and speculators to be more fundamentally at fault for crime in the city' (*Capital*, 177). Earlier social exploration writing, such as George Sims's *How the Poor Live* (1883) and Andrew Mearns's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), had taken their middle-class readership into areas such as Whitechapel in order to shock them with the levels of deprivation in the capital. Joyce highlights both their lack of moralizing about the causes of crime and their advocacy of state intervention: 'The crisis, it seems, could no longer be managed by caring individuals, but needed to be addressed by large-scale administrative institutions and apparatuses' (*Capital* 161). By exploring the parallels with debates about responsibility for crime and poverty in neoliberal Britain, *Ripper Street* offers a neo-Victorian example of social exploration writing, taking viewers into the squalor and iniquity of late-Victorian Whitechapel in order to question the vision of Victorian life promoted by free marketeers as the moral justification for austerity measures.

Ripper Street's representation of late-nineteenth-century London echoes Pete Alcock's scathing critique of Murray's idealisation of Victorian life, as both highlight the darker side of the period:

Amongst the upper middle class, Victorian family life in Britain was hierarchical and formal, rather than warm and caring; parenting was carried out largely by servants and school-masters (and mistresses); prostitution, pornography and sexual double standards were rife. Amongst the working class family life was conducted against a

background of grinding poverty in which early child death took a heavy toll of both children and their mothers; older children were forced into early and unrewarding employment; and marriage rates were low by modern standards. ('Back' 146)

Ripper Street draws attention to the ways in which the threat of poverty, far from instilling morality and Victorian virtues, provides the driving force behind crime and social disorder. While the actions of a homicidal aristocrat form the basis of Reid's investigation in 'Episode One: I Need Light', echoing some of the theories that alleged Jack the Ripper to be a member of the British establishment, they also serve to highlight the economic forces that drove his last victim to her death. When the evidence leads to the middle-class Mr Christian Thwaites (Steven Robertson) whose wife, Maude, is revealed to have participated in early experimentations with pornographic films, the initial assumption is that her actions had brought shame on him. However, Thwaites vehemently argues against this, explaining how he had convinced her to marry him and leave a life of sex work only to find that his employment was not as secure as he had believed. Therefore, Maude returned to sex work in order to shelter him from the harsh conditions of a London in which unemployment held the threat of destitution, the workhouse, and/or an early grave. Thus, the show addresses what Slavoj Žižek identifies as subjective violence, 'acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict[,] violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent', alongside objective, systemic violence, 'the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems' (*Violence* 1). Overcome by guilt and grief, Thwaites becomes a secondary victim to both forms of violence, taking his own life while in custody. As Season One develops, it becomes increasingly problematic to separate subjective and systemic violence, as poverty provokes the desperation and anger that lead to criminal acts.

Ripper Street's mixture of period drama and police procedural exemplifies the innovations of television crime series, which Sue Turnbull claims have 'always borrowed and

blurred generic categories' (TV 8). The moral ambiguity of Reid ordering Detective Sergeant Bennet Drake (Jerome Flynn) to beat information out of suspects requires an active, critical engagement from the viewer. It ties into a tradition of violent British crime drama most closely associated with Ian Kennedy Martin's *The Sweeney* (1975–8), in which, 'when it was a case of bringing offenders to justice the ends justified the means whatever the rules of engagement might be' (TV 50). At his most extreme, Reid's approach to policing is closer to Jack Bauer's (Kiefer Sutherland) in US crime drama *24* (2001–10), who notoriously used torture to counter terrorism. For example, in 'Episode Three: The King Came Calling', Reid discovers that a serial killer, Claxton (Simon Gregor), is attempting to outdo Jack the Ripper's notoriety through poisoning the public with flour produced in the factory he runs. When the delivery records for the tainted flour are burned and Claxton refuses to talk, Reid administers the poison to him and demands that he divulge the information in exchange for his life. This course of action is justified through reference to the theory of utilitarianism propounded by John Stuart Mill, which Drake paraphrases when deciding on the proper course of action as being 'whatever would lead to the greater well-being', with the implication that Claxton has '*forfeited* the rights which he is so deprived of' ('Utilitarianism' 178). However, whereas utilitarianism has been invoked by neoconservatives to support measures that undermine the universality of human rights, such as drone strikes and detention without trial, as part of the post-9/11 War on Terror and in its aftermath, Reid's application of these principles to matters concerning London's dispossessed offers a more progressive interpretation of Mill's philosophy. Thus, while Reid is willing to take extra-legal measures to prevent a mass poisoning, he also disobeys orders from his superiors that challenge his interpretation of 'the greater well-being'.

In this respect, the television crime drama that *Ripper Street* most closely resembles is David Simon's critically-acclaimed HBO series *The Wire* (2002–8), which follows the

investigations of police officers in Baltimore's post-industrial heartlands. Turnbull notes the sophistication with which Simon addresses issues of crime and poverty through the police procedural: '*The Wire* presents complex characters trying to negotiate tricky moral landscapes on both sides of the law'; 'reveals flaws in the systems and institutions supposed to support the workings of a democracy'; 'suggests that our knowledge is only ever partial and limited'; and 'suggests that crime is systemic and society itself is the crime' (TV 94). *Ripper Street* offers limited sympathetic depictions of the lives of some criminals and, like *The Wire*, examines how they are enmeshed with systemic poverty. While unwilling to go so far as to denounce society itself as the crime, *Ripper Street* does expose the blunt instrumentality of the criminal justice system and its focus on subjective violence while either ignoring or condoning the objective violence of its institutions.

'Episode Two: In My Protection', explores the neo-Victorian contention that the underclass is qualitatively different from law-abiding, hard-working citizenry, and thus incapable of being reassimilated, by looking at child gang violence. After showing the build-up to the murder of a toymaker, the episode quickly shifts to the scene of a fourteen-year-old boy, Thomas Gower (Giacomo Mancini), being handed to Reid by the Vigilance Committee. The Committee was formed during the Ripper panic and reflects a lack of faith in the police's ability to protect the public, meaning that the former simultaneously want to uphold the law while breaking it. Their scepticism about reformation mirrors the neo-Victorian politics of tabloid newspapers in neoliberal Britain, which help popularise the demonisation of the poor as an underclass. In court, the Counsel for Defence, Mr. Eagles (Hugh O'Connor), appeals to the judge for mercy:

MR EAGLES: This is a child stood here. I would hope that you might
 recognise that as an opportunity to assert the sanctity of that
 childhood, and to be merciful. This boy, and the others like

him, who we would blame for the violence on our streets, it is not they who we should punish, but the Fagins who stand behind them, directing that violence. These innocents we should protect.

JUDGE: You would urge an attempt at reformation? [...] Reformation be damned, Mr. Eagles. This child, we shall make an example of him. Thomas Gower, three days hence, you will be taken to the gallows at Newgate, where Mr. Berry will deliver you from this life and into the next.

Here we can see elements of the Victorian Puritanism Murray advocates, as criminality in youth is read as indicative of the ultimate moral corruption of the underclass. However, the impulse to set an example is challenged by Mr Eagles; his invocation of the character Fagin, an adult who grooms children to pickpocket on his behalf in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), is a cultural reference that will resonate with characters in the courtroom and many viewers. It serves as a reminder of the progressive liberal tradition of the Victorian period and its calls for social reform, which are at odds with the order and consensus implied by neo-Victorian neoliberal politics.

The judge's impulse to use extreme measures in order to discipline those who would bring gang violence to the streets of London echoes the response to the riots in 2011, which began after a protest over the killing of Mark Duggan, by police, in Tottenham. The riots subsequently spread across London and sprang up in other cities including Birmingham, Bristol, and Manchester. During the riots, properties were burnt down, people were killed, and there was widespread looting in the affected areas. As Owen Jones describes, the reaction

was very much influenced by the neoliberal ideology of a feral underclass, and attitudes quickly hardened:

Two days into the riots, nine-tenths of those polled supported the use of water cannon; two-thirds wanted the army sent in; and a third supported using live ammunition on rioters. Attempts to understand what was happening were seen as attempts to justify it. There was little appetite for social and economic explanations for the disorder sweeping English cities. People just wanted to feel safe and for those responsible to be punished. (*Chavs* xviii)

Without a belief in the possibility of rehabilitation for members of what Murray designates as the underclass and the conviction that their crimes and poverty are the result of moral failings rather than socio-economic forces, the temptation to wield the punitive power of the state to bring them to heel is evidently attractive. Thus, the judge sentencing Gower embodies the coercive forces of the Victorian class system that the neo-Victorian politics of neoliberalism argues were wrongly withdrawn with the creation of the welfare state and the introduction of the rights that went with it.

Reid is moved by Eagles's plea for him to investigate further and bring the adult gang leader to justice so that Gower might be spared. What Reid uncovers is a criminal operation through which a gang of boys have been brought together under the protection and brutal direction of an adult named Carmichael (Joseph Gilgun). Like the social exploration writers, Reid comes to the conclusion that Carmichael is exploiting the desperate poverty of the boys under his control in order to corrupt them with his criminality. As such, the gang leader is presented as being utterly devoid of any appealing characteristics, an avatar of the misery forged by grinding poverty; his tattoos suggest that he had been subjected to similar dysfunctional discipline when younger, but his past is never explored. After witnessing the violence of this Fagin figure, Reid is forced to re-evaluate his earlier position that his role is

simply to bring criminals to trial and, knowing that a pardon is unlikely to be forthcoming, he instructs his sergeant to take Gower far away. While Drake's decision to enlist Gower as a soldier may seem to conform to a conventional solution to male teenage delinquency, drawing on his own traumatic experiences in the army, he warns the boy that he will face horrors far greater than those Carmichael had inflicted.

This acknowledgement of the personal toll taken by fighting a war is built on in 'Episode Five: The Weight of One Man's Heart', which explores the fate of those whose mental and physical trauma from military service has meant that they are not able to be reassimilated into the workforce; they turn instead to violent crime. Drake's old commander, Colonel Madoc Faulkner (Iain Glen), re-establishes contact with him and reveals that he has become bitterly disillusioned with the nationalism underpinning military service given the poverty and neglect of veterans within the capital city once they are no longer of practical use. Faulkner attempts to undermine Reid in front of Drake by accusing him of defending an unequal society:

FAULKNER: My wars were against enemies of the Empire, not the poor
and desperate of its capital.

REID: Is that how you imagine our role?

FAULKNER: I lack imagination, Inspector. What I know is good men who
served our Queen with their all now languish as reward at Her
Majesty's Pleasure.

REID: Did they commit a crime?

FAULKNER: They returned from noble service to a homeland which offered neither gratitude nor succour. The best of us, made hungry and penniless, will react, *in extremis*, with extremity.

REID: I'm afraid that does not absolve them.

FAULKNER: No. All men stand equal before the law, do they not? The hero and the whoremonger.

REID: That is the law.

FAULKNER: It is your law.

Faulkner's defence of those who are driven to desperate acts due to poverty can be read as a critique of Murray's underclass theory, echoing Dryden's bitterness about being treated like scum. However, his interpretation of Reid's commitment to the rule of law makes a number of assumptions that conflate the individual with the injustices of his city. The viewer has already seen how Reid's adherence to the principle of equality before the law leads him to protect many groups of London's dispossessed. Furthermore, Faulkner does not fully abandon the division of the deserving and undeserving poor, as shown in his scornful remark 'all men stand equal before the law, do they not? The hero and the whoremonger'. Despite his rage at the brutality of Victorian society, he seems to want to elevate veterans rather than end injustice altogether. As such, Faulkner has set himself up as the messianic leader of a band of desperate ex-soldiers who are planning to execute a daring heist against the Royal Mint. Attempting to win the affection of Rose Erskine (Charlene McKenna), a prostitute who aspires to become an actress sponsored by a patron, Drake asks for a raise, but his request is

somewhat dismissed by Reid. Therefore, Faulkner's offer of potential riches persuades his former soldier to join him. However, despite meticulous planning, the colonel proves to be a false messiah as Reid is able to foil his plan when Drake abruptly shifts sides after a member of the Mint staff is killed. Thus, while sympathetic to Faulkner's plight and critique of the structural causes of poverty, the show does not endorse his solution.

Unpicking the Neoliberal State

While the neo-Victorian politics of neoliberalism in the twenty-first century focus primarily on discrediting those rendered superfluous to the economy as a burden on society, it is also careful to dismiss the possibility of the dispossessed being able to challenge the avoidable human suffering that is framed by neoliberals as an effect of the markets. From smashing the power of the trade unions, to the movement from an industrial to a service economy, politicians and corporations broke the political power of the working class in the 1980s. High unemployment and weak unions increase profit margins by deflating wages, an uncomfortable fact that is not acknowledged by Murray. The disempowerment of the working class under neoliberalism has been a long and continuous process, but of key symbolic and political significance was Thatcher's victory at the conclusion of the miners' strike of 1984–5 led by Arthur Scargill's National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Once this was achieved, a media campaign was launched by Robert Maxwell's *Daily Mirror* and ITV's *The Cook Report* in the spring of 1990 to ruin further the reputation of the NUM's leadership by making a number of claims about the misuse of strike funds associated with the dispute. However, when the allegations began to unravel, investigative journalist Seumas Milne uncovered evidence of widespread collaboration between private and public institutions in a conspiracy to bring this left-wing figure and his union into disrepute, both from within and without, culminating in the publication of *The Enemy Within: MI5, Maxwell and the Scargill*

Affair (1994). In the preface to the fourth edition, Milne notes how he discovered evidence of: ‘dirty tricks, agent provocateurs, surveillance operations, political manipulation and diplomatic deception, and the devastating lengths to which the security services were prepared to go in the war against the NUM, both during and after the 1984–5 strike’ (*Enemy* xv). This can be considered as the intersection of the neoliberal disciplinary and surveillance states in the service of global capital.

Ripper Street offers an even more high stakes conspiracy against organised labour, this time involving the British and Russian governments of the late nineteenth century as well as their respective police forces and intelligence services, in ‘Episode Six: Tournament of Shadows’. Reid is drawn into a political war against the poor and desperate of London when he is ordered not to look into the bombing of a prominent left-wing pamphleteer, Joshua Bloom, and focus instead on breaking a strike. His superior, Commissioner James Munro (Michael McElhatton), describes the strikers as manifestations of a ‘leftist cancer’ that is causing the ‘great machine’ of London to break down. The similarities with Murray’s notion of the underclass representing a plague are strong; both see elements of the working class as threatening the body politic, which they associate with the middle and upper classes. Despite his dress and eloquent, formal speech marking him as being of higher social rank than the other officers at H Division, Reid’s socially progressive beliefs make him something of an outsider within the British establishment; he surprises Munro by arguing in support of the strikers and stating that the law-abiding workers at the protest outnumber the handful of troublemakers by thousands. Nevertheless, Reid is warned off pursuing a striker advocating violence who turns out to be an agent provocateur, a Russian spy named Zotkin posing as Peter Morris (Peter Ferdinando), responsible for killing Bloom. Reid’s investigations reveal that Constantine (Derek Riddell) of Scotland Yard is fully aware of Zotkin’s activities and has directed him to discredit the strikers at any cost. Constantine challenges Reid’s notion of

what constitutes a menace to society, stating that '[Bloom] had ideas, Reid, and people listened. Ideas are far more dangerous than any bomb'. Here, Constantine effectively justifies the use of subjective violence in order to perpetuate systemic violence.

The parallels to the secret war against the miners are strong, yet also obscured by the show's historical setting. As such, *Ripper Street* can be read in light of Peter Mandler's observation that:

The imaginative capability of history is closely connected to its ethical capability.

One of the purposes of historical time travel is to transport our modern selves into alien situations which allow us to highlight by contrast our own values and assumptions. Sometimes it is easier to examine complex ethical questions honestly and openly in an historical rather than in a contemporary setting, the distancing involved in taking out some of the heat of the moment without disengaging entirely contemporary values and attitudes. In this aspect history asks us not to lose ourselves in the past but to view the past from our own standpoint; in fact, one of its functions is to help us define our own standpoint more clearly. (*History* 147)

This episode encourages the viewer to consider whether it is right that political and private interests should be able to break strikes using any means at their disposal, or whether they need to be regulated by effective oversight, and workers' recourse to industrial action be respected. Again, *Ripper Street* recalls *The Wire* in that it 'reveals flaws in the systems and institutions supposed to support the workings of a democracy'. Since it was first broadcast, the revelations of Edward Snowden about the mass surveillance of the public by the UK's GCHQ and USA's NSA have intensified the debates that underpin 'Tournament of Shadows'.

Reid applies utilitarian principles and chooses to prioritise his duty to protect the citizens of Whitechapel rather than side with the apparatus of the British establishment,

ignoring warnings and threats about the consequences of his involvement and foiling a plot to blow up a warehouse full of arsenic. That he is able to remain in post after doing so is a further indication that *Ripper Street* interrogates what Sweet characterises as ‘right-wing nostalgia’ for a nineteenth-century ‘low-tax, free-trade paradise from which we have all been expelled by social democracy’ (*Inventing*, xxii). While Reid’s support for the strikers may seem a little countercultural in an era during which all strikes are condemned by the government and most of the mainstream media, the show demonstrates how this position was gaining increasing momentum within the Victorian era. Without the outrage of the terrorist attack, the strikers persist and are able to improve their terms and conditions. However, Reid’s victory is tainted when he is forced to allow Zotkin to be exchanged for British spies by Constantine, showing that he is but one man in a much wider political system that does not share his commitment to equality before the law. When Reid tells Joshua’s brother, Isaac Bloom (Justin Avoth), that Zotkin is a protected man, the mathematician accepts this as part of his pessimistic view of human progress based on theories from his own field:

BLOOM: The entropy of the universe tends to a maximum. [...] Disorder, Inspector. Everything, from the smallest system to our entire world moves always, irretrievably, from order into chaos. And there is nothing to be done about it. Do you share that belief?

REID: No.

BLOOM: Well, perhaps you are, after all, a man of faith.

Despite becoming increasingly aware of the systemic violence of the society he ostensibly protects, across the episodes of the first season Reid’s commitment to the potential for human progress is strengthened.

Milne notes how the symbolic importance of the miners' strike has been contested in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, which resulted from neoliberal deregulation of finance:

[T]he battle over coal in the 1980s was in any case about power and class, not fuel — just as the arguments about the legacy of the miners' strike are as much about the future as the past. [...] The industrial and political conditions that gave rise to the 1984–5 strike, along with the miners' victories of the early 1970s, will never recur in that particular form. But as the economic order that Thatcher helped build has foundered, the message of the miners' struggle can speak to our times — and both its lessons and example will be an inspiration long into the future. (*Enemy* xxi–ii)

Despite the relative scarcity of strikes during the austerity programme, the scale of the political response to them has been draconian, as exemplified by the current Trade Union Bill working its way through parliament in 2015–6. Ellie Mae O'Hagan argues that the combined effect of proposals such as the imposition of turnout thresholds, allowing the use of agency workers to cover during strikes, and the restrictions on picketing amount to a 'remarkably unabashed assault on the rights of working people that goes way beyond anything Thatcher attempted in the 1980s' ('Sinister'). The bill shows the symbolic threat unions still pose to the neoliberal narrative that blames poverty on moral failings and the checks they can apply to the power of global capital. Therefore, without needing to draw an explicit connection with the defining strike of the Thatcher government, 'Episode Six' highlights how class solidarity, when not undermined by a compliant media, agent provocateurs, and state-led infiltration, can overcome, or at least challenge, the demands of the free market. As such, the neo-Victorian representation of successful strike action makes an intervention against the neoliberal demonisation of unions and scorn towards their capacity to improve the lives of the dispossessed.

Conclusion

As Heilmann and Llewellyn note, ‘some of the best neo-Victorian work seeks simultaneously to tell a “good story” and throw into question in productive ways the very nature of the neo-Victorian enterprise on aesthetic and ethical grounds’ (*Neo-Victorianism* 16). By cloaking its critique of the structural forces within neoliberalism that prevent the poor from escaping poverty in the plot of a high-stakes action thriller, *Ripper Street* achieves a balance with its need to entertain as a prime-time BBC One show and, subsequently, a co-production with Amazon. *Ripper Street* encourages a reappraisal of the neo-Victorian neoliberal response to poverty and crime by shifting focus from individual moral failings to the systemic causes and interrelation between both. Furthermore, it ties this into a critique of private and political vested interests that benefit from this arrangement. In doing so, the show challenges some of the key elements of neoliberal ideology and its sustained assault on the welfare state and workers’ rights. However, the freedom to ‘examine complex ethical questions honestly and openly’ offered by neo-Victorian fiction also reflects the continuing hegemony of neoliberalism. In the wake of the Conservative victory in the 2015 general election, even deeper cuts and increasingly authoritarian policies have been set out for the current parliament, and the forthcoming Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership currently being negotiated between the EU Commission and the United States Government is structured around deepening the ‘strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’ that Harvey identifies as the core principles of neoliberalism. Despite the convergence of state policies and corporate activities at the highest levels of power, opposition to austerity and support for the welfare state has grown since 2010, with groups such as 38 Degrees, Avaaz, and UK Uncut drawing attention to the corruption and vested interests that seek to retain the neo-Victorian politics of neoliberalism. More recently, the astonishing victory of

the anti-austerity socialist Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership contest on a platform that emphasized the state's role in ending the 'scourge' of poverty, who subsequently appointed Milne as his head of strategy and communications, demonstrates that the arguments against the free market are once again gaining traction. Thus, while *Ripper Street* functions perfectly well as an entertaining hybrid of the police procedural and period drama, it also links its plots and themes to the developing challenge to austerity in terms of its need for both individual bravery, exemplified by Reid and his team, and mass demands from below, shown in both the striking workers' and the peaceful socialists' successful foundational work for the welfare state to come.

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